

THE SOCIETY'S NEW PRESIDENT

FOR the year which marks the Society's seventieth anniversary, the Council invited its most distinguished member, Dr Gilbert Murray, O.M., to accept the Presidency. He was formally elected on 23 April.

Dr Murray joined the Society in 1894, twelve years after its foundation, and was President for the year 1915-16. He was a member of the Council for many years, and has been a Vice-President since 1920. His Presidential Address will be delivered at 8 p.m. on Wednesday, 21 May, in the Great Hall of the Caxton Hall, Westminster, S.W.1.

REVIEWS

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE OCCULT. By D. H. Rawcliffe. London, Ridgway, 1952. 551 pp. Illus. 21s.

The main purpose of this book is to discredit psychical research (for which the author prefers to use the emotive term 'occult research') which he says is today 'assuming alarming proportions' and even 'invading the precincts of our most distinguished universities' (p. 9). It has seemed to many of us that it was better that experimental inquiry should be taking place into such matters, and that such experimental inquiry by trained researchers was the most hopeful way of sifting the true from the false. Mr Rawcliffe seems to feel no need for such sifting; it is all 'occultism' and, therefore, all false. All that needs to be done is to think of a 'rational' explanation of any apparently successful psi experiment.

There is, of course, nothing new in this position, and when Jastrow argued twenty-five years ago that the crucial experiments for extrasensory perception were not rigid enough to satisfy the experimental psychologist, he could make out a reasonable case for this opinion. The situation is different now. Experiments have been carried out under conditions which met all reasonable objections and still successes have continued. Unconscious whispering seemed at one time as if it might be a plausible explanation, and Mr Rawcliffe seems still prepared to back it strongly. But psi successes have taken place under conditions in which such an explanation is absurd, e.g. in ESP experiments over long distances, in precognition experiments, and in the Duke DT experiments in which the target cards were known to no one until the guesses were completed.

There is nothing judicial about Mr Rawcliffe's survey of the field of parapsychology. He reminds one rather of a prosecuting counsel with a weak case, concerned to create conviction at all costs. There is, for example, much abuse of the parapsychologist for 'bias and incompetence' (pp. 479 and 486). There are references to the parapsychologists as amateurs; they are contrasted with the psychologists who (according to Mr Rawcliffe) reject the findings of parapsychological experiments. The intention seems to be to suggest to the jury that Professor Gardner Murphy and Dr Schmeidler are amateur psychologists while the author is a professional. A jury sufficiently ignorant of the facts might perhaps be led to suppose that this was true.

Obviously one needs to trouble oneself less about the evidence if the jury can be convinced that all the witnesses on the other side are unreliable. Thus, on p. 323: 'Richet, Myers and Lodge all believed in the unseen spirit world and died steadfast in their belief'. This is true of Myers and Lodge, false of Richet; irrelevant in any case as a means of judging the correctness of their observations. Dalton believed in the atomic hypothesis and died steadfast in that belief, but this is not ground for rejecting his experimental work. On p. 313 we learn that evidence coming from Osty is highly suspect because psychical research was his all-absorbing interest. If all evidence as to paranormal phenomena must be suspect if it comes either from workers who believe in paranormal phenomena or who are strongly interested in it, we shall be left with little evidence. But a similar criterion would leave us with little evidence on any other branch of research.

On p. 323: 'Palladino's investigators were not really investigating her "phenomena" at all. What they were all hoping to do was to prove her "phenomena" authentic.' How does Mr Rawcliffe know this? 'The Soal experiments were first and foremost designed to establish *scientifically* the validity of a purely *meta-physical* concept' (p. 458). My own recollection of Dr Soal's attitude is that, on the contrary, what he was trying to establish was that, under properly controlled conditions, a subject in card guessing experiments could not beat the laws of chance. Being an open-minded man, he gave up that idea when the experimental evidence went against it, but it is absurd to credit him with the opposite pre-conception.

Although Mr Rawcliffe devotes a chapter to discussion of the American experiments in ESP, these are mostly devoted to discrediting the experimenters. There is no need to protect Duke parapsychological investigators against the charge of experimental incompetence. Many competent judges have examined their work critically and come to the opposite conclusion. Mr Raw-

cliffe makes no attempt at a fair appraisal of the evidence from this laboratory by considering the experiments carried out with the fullest precautions against error. There is, for example, no mention of the Pearce-Pratt series of experiments which is claimed by Rhine as the most adequate evidence for the reality of ESP. A sneer at Dr Schmeidler on p. 442, based on a criticism by Dr Soal of a minor detail in her evaluation of results, shows complete ignorance of the point of the criticism.

Dr Soal receives more adequate treatment in the next chapter. The Shackleton results, however, are explained as due to a double system of unconscious whispering by assistant-experimenter and agent. This suggestion is not altogether novel. If it is considered to be a possible explanation of the main Shackleton series of results, it is obviously not applicable to the preliminary Shackleton series in which there was precognitive guessing on a pack of cards, or to the Antwerp-London experiments with Mrs Stewart. For the Antwerp-London series, Mr Rawcliffe has to fall back on the suggestion that the conditions were such that Dr Soal had the opportunity of faking the records.

Mr Rawcliffe does not seem altogether happy about these criticisms of Soal's experiments, since he tries to strengthen them by some statistical considerations which show a curious lack of understanding. On p. 471, for example, he says that even if his other criticisms were not sound, the Shackleton series would be a weak support for Soal's conclusions since their total number is *only* 6,690 guesses which is a small number compared with the American experiments. This, of course, has nothing to do with the case; the anti-chance odds were 10^{85} to 1, which is by no means weak. He is surprised by the 200 guesses with 60 right by Mrs Stewart ten feet from the telephone (p. 472), but remarks that 200 trials is too small a number to be of any significance. This is not the case; the odds against such an excess of right answers arising by chance in 200 guesses is 2,000 to 1 which is amply significant.

If all his criticisms against the experiments fall to the ground, Mr Rawcliffe has a further line of defence in Chapter XXVIII. They could not prove telepathy because this is a metaphysical and not a scientific hypothesis. This is, of course, a mixture of sense and nonsense: the sense is less unfamiliar to parapsychologists than Mr Rawcliffe supposes. What one can do by experiment is to discover whether the knowing of something by one person can be a sufficient condition for an appropriate action with respect to that item of knowledge by another person in the absence of any communication between them through sensory channels. Obviously the success of such an experiment does not tell one that 'tele-

pathy' (or ESP or psi) is the appropriate name to apply to the capacity revealed by such an experiment, nor anything further about the nature of the capacity than is implied in the experimental situation. 'Telepathy' (or ESP or psi) is merely the name given to the capacity indicated by the experiment, and new experiments must be designed to discover anything further we want to know about the capacity. There is nothing metaphysical about that; the concepts of parapsychology are parallel to such concepts as 'energy', 'radiation', etc.

It is rather surprising to find that a book of this kind has a foreword by Julian Huxley which expresses a hope that it may be widely read and taken to heart. However, Huxley expresses disagreement with the main thesis of the book, and says that he cannot follow the author 'in stigmatizing studies on telepathy, clairvoyance, etc., as "occult research", unfit to be admitted to our universities' (p. 6).

The real difference between Mr Rawcliffe and the experimental psychical researcher (or parapsychologist) is that between the Inquisition and Galileo. He knows beforehand what can and what cannot happen; the psychical researcher wants to find out by experiment. We can agree with him that we must find a 'rational' explanation of parapsychological experimental results, but that is not necessarily the explanation that would have seemed to us to be the most rational one before experiment started. If ESP proves to take place, then explanation by ESP is not an irrational one. The question must be settled by experiment, and Mr Rawcliffe gives us no new experimental facts and no new insight into the old ones. Our problems are to be solved by experiment and not by the methods of the debating society.

R. H. THOULESS

THE PSYCHIC SOURCE BOOK. Edited by Alson J. Smith. Introduction by Pitirim A. Sorokin. New York, Creative Age Press, 1951. xii, 442 pp. \$4.00.

This book is described by the publishers as 'a big, exhaustive, factual compendium on the ever-alluring subject of extrasensory perception and psychic research'; and even after applying a necessary corrective to a publisher's natural enthusiasm it can be said the contents cover a wide field and should be a useful primer for newcomers to parapsychology.

It consists mainly of twenty articles culled from the writings of eminent scholars and scientists, about half of whom are from this country. These articles are mostly of the review type and, though necessarily condensed, give a fair account of their authors' views.